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Universities in 2016: Open or Closed?

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Introduction

I begin by taking you back nearly fifty years to the inaugural ceremony of the UK Open University. It was held, appropriately enough, in the week that humankind first landed on the moon. Noting this, the University's foundation Chancellor, Geoffrey Crowther, a former editor of *The Economist* newspaper said: *'what a happy chance it is that we start on this task in this very week when the Universe has opened. The limits not only of explorable space, but of human understanding, are infinitely wider than we have believed.'*

After the inauguration of the Open University in 1969 many countries created similar institutions, often also calling them 'open universities'. The meaning of the label 'open' varied somewhat from country to country but in all cases these open universities could say with, Lord Crowther, 'we are open as to places. This University has no cloisters - a word meaning closed'.

That comment inspires my title today: *Universities in 2016: Open or Closed?* Back in the 1970s some expected that the creation of open universities would stimulate all universities to become more open on various dimensions. But this either did not happen or, where it did, it took a long time.

The UK Open University had declared that it would be 'open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas'. Campus universities could not easily become 'open to places' by offering distance education, but they could have begun to open up their admissions criteria and adopt new methods and ideas for teaching and learning. In the event we had to wait for thirty years and the arrival of the Internet before things really began to change - and then only slowly.

Where are we today?

The question of whether contemporary universities are open or closed links us to a broader question about societies generally.

Open or closed: the new political spectrum?

Some claim that the old political divisions of left and right are no longer relevant today and that the salient divide now is between open and closed. Some societies may be deciding to become more closed. We do not yet know whether the American electorate will indulge Donald Trump's fantasy of a wall between the US and Mexico, but we have seen the UK vote to withdraw partially from the world by leaving the European Union.

Nativist and populist politicians who stress the differences between 'us' and 'them' are making plenty of running, not to mention the terrorists for whom the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is a pretext for murder and violence.

The Economist claims that after a period of steady gains democracy is now somewhat in retreat here in Africa. Meanwhile the least one can say about China and Russia is that political freedoms there have stopped increasing.

But these are probably just temporary setbacks. In his new and resolutely optimistic book *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future,* the Swedish historian Johan Norberg shows that in measures of freedom, openness and equality and other indicators of progress the long-term trends are all positive.

Moreover the fundamental driver of progress has always been education. The young and not so young people coming out of Africa's schools and universities will ensure that Africa continues to progress. Education gives people aspirations from which countries benefit greatly, even if their rulers sometimes find them inconvenient.

Where does higher education now fit on the continuum between open and closed? My focus will not be on the subjects that universities offer but rather on whom they teach, where they teach, how they teach and what qualifications they give. The UK Open University's four opens (people, places, methods and ideas) provide a useful framework and I shall look at how technology generally, and the Internet in particular, is changing institutional behaviour.

A one-word answer: MOOC?

Perhaps there is a simple one-word answer: MOOC! Higher education is now open on all these dimensions because of the MOOC.

The term Massive Open Online Course was invented in Canada in 2008 to describe a campus course that was offered free online to hundreds of students off campus. No one took much notice until 2012 when several prestigious US universities offered MOOCs on a much larger scale, creating frenzy in the news media. These free courses were open to people without any formal admission requirements. Several hundred thousand learners took them back in 2012.

This MIT course is one example. Since then, as the number of MOOCs on offer around the world has climbed into the thousands, learners number in the many millions.

I contribute to those figures myself because I am now enrolled in my 14th MOOC from the FutureLearn consortium, which was created by the Open University and now has nearly a hundred institutional members, including the University of Cape Town. I've taken MOOCS on a range of topics.

The topic of my latest one is *Ageing Well: Falls* and it was created by Newcastle University. The description says: 'Explore why people fall, discover practical methods to reduce the risk of falling and recognise when to seek expert help'. This shows how MOOCs have evolved in four years, from the orthodox topic of the MIT course to a course on falls, which would not be likely to appear in a regular programme on campus.

This slide sums it up. There are now thousands of MOOCs on every subject imaginable and the meaning of every letter in the acronym MOOC is negotiable. Nevertheless if we align the words in MOOC with the four opens of the UKOU it is clear that MOOCs have been a force for openness.

But that openness has limits. I have put a row of question marks against the word 'course' because most MOOCs do not lead to credit and qualifications, although that is changing. Even students who got full marks in the tests for the MIT Electronics MOOC could not get credit for it if they went to study on campus, although the curriculum was the same.

Higher education is not just about teaching and learning but also, very importantly, about assessment and credentials. The contribution of MOOCs to openness is limited if they do not include that element.

That brings me a key point. MOOCs are not, in themselves, the transformation of higher education that the news media heralded in 2012. But they have stimulated a much wider transformation across higher education by making online learning respectable. Not long ago most universities were rather dubious about distance education but MOOCs changed that. If Harvard was going online it must be OK.

MOOCs have been the catalyst that has made all universities engage seriously with the online world. But only a tiny proportion of universities are doing this by offering MOOCs; most are exploring how to incorporate online learning into their regular credit programmes. Indeed, some think that we have already reached the high-water mark of MOOCs in higher education. The founders of America's commercial MOOC companies are moving on to other jobs.

FutureLearn is diversifying its list of partners to include specialist organisations teaching very practical subjects. The Commonwealth of Learning is partnering with governments and development organisations in the creation of MOOCs to address massive needs for skills development, for example in the agricultural sector in India.

Online learning in regular programmes

So for the rest of this talk I shall concentrate on the use of online learning in regular university programmes, that is to say programmes leading to credits and credentials.

The Babson Reports have been tracking the development of online learning in higher education in the US since 2003. This year's report declares that: 'when more than one-quarter of higher education students are taking a course online, distance education is clearly mainstream'. Online enrolments in the US have been climbing steadily since the beginning of this century but have grown much faster since MOOCs made online respectable. Attitudes have changed.

Over 70% of senior academic officers in American universities now consider that learning outcomes in online education are the same or superior to those in face-to-face instruction, while fewer than 30% see them as inferior.

I cite data from the US because it has data. Most countries don't have good data but it is clear that online learning is becoming more common everywhere. One reason that data is difficult to collect is that online learning is often combined with some face-to-face teaching. Although universities speak proudly of their developments in online learning they usually refer to what they are doing by other names, such as blended learning and flexible learning.

Let us ask two questions about those terms. First, blended learning means mixing online and face-to-face. What is the best mix? Second, flexible learning sound good, but how flexible can we make learning before it becomes ineffective?

Anyone who wants to understand online learning owes a great debt to Professor Tony Bates for his magisterial e-book, *Teaching in a Digital Age.* You can download it free and it is also available in French and Spanish.

I shall make distinctions using the definitions in the Babson Reports. These are:

- Online: at least 80% of the course content is delivered online.

- Face-to-face: courses in which zero to 29% of the content is delivered online (this category includes both traditional and webfacilitated courses).

- Blended (or hybrid): between 30% and 80% of course content delivered online.

Blended learning

Most people use the terms blended and hybrid interchangeably. Tony Bates suggests, however, that it is more helpful to use blended learning' for all combinations of online and face-to-face with between 30% to 80% delivered online, but to restrict the term 'hybrid learning' to blended courses where, instead of using online technology in opportunistic and serendipitous ways, the whole teaching-learning system is redesigned to create optimum synergy between the face-to-face sessions and learning online.

That, of course begs the question of how to achieve optimum synergy.

The research shows that asynchronous online learning gives better results than face-to- face teaching. The superiority of blended learning probably lies not in the online medium itself but in the combination of elements that it brings into play, resulting in deeper student engagement with the instructional system. Unfortunately there is very little evidence or theory to guide decisions about what is best done online and what is best done in person in blended learning, or indeed when fully online learning is a better option than classroom teaching.

Bates argues that we should therefore follow what he calls the *law of equal substitution*, namely the assumption that academically, most courses can be taught equally well online or face-to-face. From this starting point other factors, 'such as cost, convenience for teachers, social networking, the skills and knowledge of the instructor, the type of students, or the context of the campus, will be stronger determinants of whether to teach a course online or on campus than the academic demands of the subject matter'.

Flexible learning

We discussed blended learning in terms of the pedagogy for individual courses. Our concluding comments about flexible learning focus on the administrative frameworks in which learning takes place. Flexibility is a good quality, but like most things in life it is best pursued in moderation.

Designing buildings in earthquake zones provides a good analogy. The buildings that fall down during an earthquake are either too rigid, so they break, or too flexible, so they collapse.

For years higher education was closed and inflexible. Universities had rigid admissions procedures, rules that required most courses to be taken from the same institution, time limits for study, and so on. Today's greater openness and flexibility is welcome - always provided that it really helps students to achieve their objectives.

In three areas too much flexibility may be a hindrance. These are the timing of study, the diversification of outcomes, and the notion of unbundling the elements of higher education.

Timing

Online learning is asynchronous. Students can choose when they study. But this power to bridge time needs careful handling. If students' convenience were the main criterion, then we should allow them to enrol in a course at any time and complete it at their own pace. Flexibility in start dates is fine, but there is abundant evidence that abolishing end dates and making courses entirely self-paced after enrolment leads to lower retention and completion rates.

That's because all learners need a mechanism to motivate them to give some priority to their studies. This usually takes the form of assignment deadlines and a fixed date for the end of the course while giving them flexibility to schedule their work within this framework.

Another approach is to break the course into several shorter courses so that the student can complete each one more quickly and, if desired, take a break before tackling the next one.

Diversification of outcomes

What about outcomes? Students coming into higher education are seeking - and being offered - a wider range of learning outcomes than in the past. Shorter learning opportunities (like MOOCs) are blossoming under the stimulus of online learning. There is now a range of approaches to certifying learning outcomes leading right up to the examinations and screening used by the most exacting professions.

Online technologies have facilitated this diversification, open badges being a good example. Open badges are based on software that allows any organisation or individual to present a digital badge to a learner who has satisfied the criteria for earning it. Because they are in digital format, badges can include more information about what and how the learners studied, how they were assessed, the time involved, etc. than a normal paper record.

Students should be aware that new forms of certification take time to establish their credibility, although in this fast-moving field that time need not be very long. Nevertheless, after learners find a course that matches their needs they should check the credibility, within that particular field, of the body that will certify their achievement.

Unbundling higher education

In the online world the various steps in the process of higher education can be separated. We could now separate course design, content development, delivery, support, assessment and credentialing so that they could, in principle, be done by different organisations. This is called the unbundling of higher education. Previously institutions assembled the complete learning experience and offered it to students as a 'bundle'.

Now, at least in theory, students will be able to select the providers of content, seek the mentoring that they want and then be assessed in dedicated assessment centres so as to secure recognition by professional bodies, credit coordinating agencies, and/or universities and colleges.

Does this describe a happy world of extraordinary flexibility and rich choice for learners or something closer to anarchy? These elements of flexibility will doubtless become available. It sounds good for students to design learning journeys tailored to their personal wishes, but will many students want that? We suspect that few students will choose the unbundled model.

First, because they like the security of dealing with an institution that they trust. This is why most students choose online providers that have a presence in their own country.

Second, academics like continuity in their student body so that they can get to know their students, both as a group and also as individuals.

Third, institutions also like to be able to identify 'their' students. In many jurisdictions student numbers determine funding from governments.

For these reasons we expect that HEIs will react to unbundling by organising themselves to re-bundle the learning experience for students - and that students will accept this gratefully.

Conclusion

To conclude I return to the question of my title: *Universities in 2016 - Open or Closed?*

My answer is that universities are much more open than they used to be. As the numbers gaining higher education continue to increase by the many millions this augurs well for the steady progress of openness and liberal values in countries all over the world.